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SUBJECT: MACEDONIA: TWO STEPS FORWARD, ONE STEP BACK --
ROUND II OF LEADERSHIP TALKS

REF: SKOPJE 1120 AND PREVIOUS

Classified By: P/E CHIEF SHUBLER, REASONS 1.4(B) AND (D).

SUMMARY

¶1. (SBU) Leaders of Macedonia's four main parties (government and opposition) met December 13 behind closed doors, with U.S. and EU facilitation, in their second meeting to discuss how to move forward on Macedonia's main Euro-Atlantic integration reforms (reftel). Three of the four parties reached consensus on moving forward on two agenda items, including forming expert working groups for discussing a draft parliamentary rulebook and constitutional changes related to education. Two of the parties (SDSM and DPA) also agreed to further high-level talks on the composition of the Parliamentary Committee on Inter-ethnic Relations, a key demand by the eAlbanian opposition DUI party. DUI leaders, however, brought the process to a halt by refusing to move forward on other issues until the Committee matter is resolved.

¶2. (C) Although government coalition partners VMRO-DPMNE and DPA did not go out of their way to be accommodating, DUI's continued obstructionism will not lead to its goal of entering the government, whether by bringing down the current government and winning a place in a new coalition after snap elections, or by being included, under pressure, in the existing coalition by the current government. We will tell DUI, and we will urge our EU colleagues to send the same clear message, that it risks being left in the cold unless it shifts course and begins playing the role of a constructive opposition party. End Summary.

ROUND TWO OF LEADERSHIP TALKS ON REFORM AGENDA

¶3. (SBU) The leaders of Macedonia's four main political parties met behind closed doors under U.S. and EU auspices in the Parliament on December 13, following up on their November 27 leadership meeting to discuss how to move forward on Macedonia's key Euro-Atlantic integration reforms (reftel). EU Special Representative (EUSR) Fouere outlined the agenda, to which the parties had contributed their top legislative or policy priorities. The agenda included constitutional amendments to allow for mandatory secondary school education (VMRO-DPMNE proposal); reconstituting the parliamentary committee on inter-ethnic relations (opposition eAlbanian DUI); ensuring a broad consensus for a new parliamentary rulebook (opposition SDSM); and passing a more liberal

religious freedom law (eAlbanian DPA).

¶ 14. (SBU) Fouere proposed that the parties agree to form working groups to continue discussions on those issues on which there was a general consensus. The Ambassador urged the party leaders to focus on how to move ahead on the reform agenda, and underscored the parties' ownership of the process of advancing government-opposition dialogue.

GOVERNMENT PRESSES FOR CONSTITUTIONAL AMENDMENTS

¶ 15. (SBU) Speaking for the governing VMRO-DPMNE, PM Gruevski thanked the U.S. and EU for their role in the political dialogue process and discussed constitutional amendments related to education. Gruevski also urged a broad consensus for adoption of a parliamentary rulebook that would impose time limits on general floor debates. He argued that Macedonia needed to pass 300-400 NATO/EU membership-related laws over the next four years, and therefore needed to improve its legislative efficiency.

INTER-ETHNIC RELATIONS COMMITTEE A DUI PRECONDITION FOR FURTHER TALKS

¶ 16. (SBU) DUI president Ahmeti said his party did not oppose improvements to education, but that the party first wanted to resolve the issue of the makeup of the Parliamentary Committee for Inter-ethnic Relations and its role in determining which legislation requires a qualified majority (Badinter) vote (reftel). The Committee issue had to be resolved before there could be further dialogue on other issues, he said. DUI added that the Committee was an institution derived from the Ohrid Framework Agreement (FWA)

SKOPJE 00001174 002 OF 003

to ensure ethnic minorities have a voice in political dialogue on important legislation. Since it was not currently functioning, because DUI members had withdrawn to protest its composition, it should be dismissed and then re-elected in accordance with a consensus reached in the context of the existing dialogue.

STRIVING FOR CONSENSUS ON RULEBOOK

¶ 17. (SBU) SDSM president Sekerinska said her party could in principal support the constitutional amendments on education, but she first wanted to know what Gruevski's plan would cost taxpayers and how it could be implemented. Regarding the parliamentary rulebook, she argued for a broad discussion of the current draft to build a consensus, and then adoption of a revised version at the end of the government's mandate, which was common practice elsewhere. The efficiency of the parliament could be boosted, she argued, by prioritizing the legislative agenda. DUI VP Teuta Arifi said the rulebook should ensure both greater parliamentary efficiency AND an equal voice on key legislation for all ethnic groups, in which case the government and DUI positions might be reconciled.

WEAK STATE INSTITUTIONS?

¶ 18. (SBU) DPA leader Arben Xhaferi said the current dialogue process underscored the inability of state institutions to resolve key issues. He proposed a full review and evaluation of progress in implementing the Ohrid Framework Agreement, rather than addressing each of the issues on the agenda. Gruevski continued to press for a revised rulebook now, rather than at the end of his government's mandate, to promote legislative efficiency. The EUSR proposed a more detailed technical discussion of the constitutional changes issue, perhaps in a working group setting.

NO OBJECTIONS TO MORE LIBERAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM LAW

¶ 19. (SBU) Gruevski noted the importance of a liberal religious freedom law for Macedonia's NATO and EU membership prospects,

but said Macedonia's main religious communities opposed a more liberal bill. Nevertheless, the government was redrafting the current bill and would resubmit it to OSCE/ODIHR for review. Gruevski wanted to consult with the parties on the draft legislation, and also would seek to work with the religious communities to build consensus for it. No party spoke against such a bill, but SDSM wanted to review the text before it would support the bill.

TWO STEPS FORWARD....

¶10. (SBU) The EUSR and the Ambassador jointly proposed the formation of technical or expert working groups to further build consensus on the constitutional amendments and parliamentary rulebook issues. In the meantime, they suggested, the constitution of the Committee on Inter-ethnic Relations could be discussed at a future leadership meeting, either with or without the EU and U.S. present. There appeared to be general consensus among the parties, except for DUI, on that approach.

...ONE STEP BACK

¶11. (C) After a short break for consultations, Gruevski returned to argue that the Committee on Inter-ethnic Relations had been formed following a mathematical model for apportioning seats on it, and that the matter therefore did not need further discussion. On the other two matters, however, he agreed to technical discussions in the parliament, which he offered to host, but without EU or U.S. attendance. VMRO-DPMNE's Vlado Popovski, a law professor, gave a meandering legal analysis of the FWA, essentially describing the Committee as irrelevant, since the laws intended to be passed by a Badinter vote already were listed in the FWA.

¶12. (C) DPA VP Thaci then attacked DUI for lacking sincerity in the talks. He accused Ahmeti of wanting to use the Inter-ethnic Committee and the Badinter principle to block the government's work, although he said DPA could accept a different composition of the Committee if the parties agreed

SKOPJE 00001174 003 OF 003

to that. DUI's Ahmeti insisted on resolving the Committee issue before the other two issues could be addressed. The meeting ended with the Ambassador intervening to stop an acrimonious exchange between DUI and DPA, and with SDSM proposing another dialogue meeting, this time hosted by the President of Parliament or the Prime Minister. The parties agreed to inform the IC representatives of their next steps.

COMMENT

¶13. (C) The main objective of our joint work with the EU on this endeavor was to give DUI a venue for participating as an opposition member in serious political debate on priority legislative and policy matters. Although VMRO-DPMNE and DPA did not go out of their way to be accommodating, DUI's continued inflexibility reflects a stubborn refusal to take a more constructive approach. That is a miscalculation, since Gruevski has told us he is convinced he can work without DUI's support or participation in the process. If DUI chooses to follow the path of obstinate obstruction, there is little more we can do but make it clear we do not support them, and that the only viable option is one that puts them in the role of a constructive opposition party. That is a message we intend to take to Ahmeti, and to urge that our EU colleagues also convey, in the days ahead.

MILOVANOVIC